

In This Village, Every Child Knows his Ragas



Namita Devidayal

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Namita Devidayal (Times of India)

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Every evening, after school homework or hockey practice, the boys and girls of Bhaini Sahib, a sleepy village near Ludhiana, grab their instruments and run to the music room. There, under portraits of great musicians, they learn to sing or play the sitar, sarod, tabla and dilruba. They learn compositions about peacocks dancing in the rain, and about Krishna and Nanak. They learn how to accompany each other. They learn how to listen.

Bhaini Sahib could be any other Punjabi village hidden amidst endless wheat fields. But it harbours one rather amazing secret. Over the last 100 years, every child here has been taught Indian classical music. Regardless of whether they grow up to become farmers, shopkeepers or homemakers, music remains a parallel track in their lives.

“We believe that if you learn music as a child, you become a better human being. Some of us

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have gone on to become professional musicians, but that is not the goal.” Says Balwant Singh Namdhari, 36, an accomplished vocalist who, when he is not out performing, is gently cajoling notes out of the children, or teaching them why a certain raga is sung only at twilight, or why the beats of the tabla correspond to the rhythmic cycles of the universe. “The tradition is very strong,” he says. “When we were children, we were all woken up before sunrise to practise; today my 14-year-old son is doing the same thing.”

Music has always been embedded in the Sikh spiritual tradition, and the verses in the Granth Sahib are meticulously set to 31 ragas – starting with Shri, ending with Jaijaiwanti. This scripture incorporates the teachings of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh saints and mystics and requires some knowledge of Indian classical music. But the intimacy between music and divinity was taken to another level by the Namdharis, a traditional Sikh sect which believes the Gurus did not end with the tenth Guru Gobind Singh, but continue to live

among them. Around the mid-19th century, the Namdharis made a base in Bhaini Sahib, in Ludhiana district, where many Sikhs were martyred during the freedom movement. Today, the village is home to around 500 families.

Guru of good things

The tradition of teaching music to children was started by the Namdhari spiritual leader, Satguru Pratap Singh. He famously said, "I want the fragrance of music to touch every child." When he died in 1959, his son Satguru Jagjit Singh had inherited his passion. He was himself an accomplished singer and played the dilruba, whose plaintive notes have traditionally accompanied shabad music. He gradually nurtured a potent musical environment – in Bhaini Sahib and across India, touching the lives of many non-Namdharis as well.

The elders of Bhaini Sahib encouraged young people to pursue music at a time when it was not

a respected vocation in an India that was refashioning itself as a global industrial nation. For example, in 1973, Satguru Jagjit Singh happened to hear a very young Rajan and Sajan Mishra sing in Delhi. He called the elder of the two brothers and learned that he was working as a trainee in a company called DCM, for Rs 500 a month. He promised to send him the same amount if he pursued music full-time. "I gave my resignation the very next day," says Rajan Mishra, who comes from a family of musicians in Benaras and is today one of India's most beloved vocalists. "Satguruji believed that music keeps negativity away. We keep going back to Bhaini Sahib, to teach and perform."

Satguru Jagjit Singh built ties with the great masters so that they could teach the children of Bhaini Sahib. He went to Benaras and won over Bismillah Khan. The initially grumpy shehnai maestro melted when he heard this unusual Sikh visitor sing, and agreed to take one of the children, Kirpal Singh, under his wing. He taught him the

taar-shehnai, a string instrument which sounds like the shehnai because of an attached conical mouthpiece. Today, Kirpal Singh is a banker but also happens to be one of the top taar-shehnai players in the world and has, in turn, taught many children. Many years ago, the tabla master Kishan Maharaj was similarly cajoled to teach a child, Sukhwinder Singh, who now teaches tabla and the jodi-pakhawaj (a traditional Punjab gharana style of playing) to children. Sitar maestro Vilayat Khan spent many days in Bhaini Sahib. And Shivkumar Sharma gets his santoor made by an elderly Sikh there.

Loop of learning

This loop of learning has fostered both excellence and perpetuity. The best among the children learn with the great masters so that they can come back and continue teaching younger children. A hostel in central Mumbai is available for free to any child who wishes to come and learn at the Allah Rakha Academy or with Shivkumar Sharma or Yogesh Shamsie, all of whom have close

ties to Bhaini Sahib. "The tradition of ensuring that every child is steeped in music continues today," says Gurdial Singh, a product of the Bhaini Sahib conservatory, who now teaches children sitar while pursuing a PhD in music at Panjab University in Chandigarh.

Thanks to the Sikh Namdhari diaspora, which has concentrated pockets in Thailand, England and Canada, Indian classical music has travelled to all these places and children there learn singing as well as traditional instruments like the dilruba which is scarcely played in India any more. Harbhajan Singh, a sitar player and vocalist, who learned with Amjad Ali Khan, has taught at least three generations of children in both Punjab and the UK.

The children of Bhaini Sahib play their instruments as if they were cycling down the fields; they guzzle music as if it were desi ghee. Not surprisingly, many children have excelled in other fields – in keeping with what brands like Baby

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Mozart peddle to ambitious parents, that music makes you sharper all round. Bhaini Sahib has produced many sports stars, including a captain of the Indian hockey team and a national badminton champion.

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Awesome...

I love all these things at Bhaini Sahib.. I'm just speechless... I can just say Dhan Shri Satguru Partap Singh Ji, Dhan Shri Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji, Dhan Shri Satguru Uday Singh Ji.agum wadhwa

The music room leaves little time for digital devices or other distractions that mesmerise the young today. While many youth in Punjab have been addled with a drug problem, not one teenager from Bhaini Sahib has fallen into substance abuse.

"Their addiction is music; it is a shortcut to the divine," says Taranjiet Singh Namdhari, a Mumbai-based filmmaker, who is making a documentary on Bhaini Sahib and its relationship with music. "It inculcates a discipline within you. If your life becomes disciplined as well as lyrical, you will live peacefully. You will not fight at home. We will have a more peaceful world. Instead of firing a tank, fire a raga and see the difference."

It is early morning in Bhaini Sahib. The birds have begun to sing, long before darkness turns into dawn. Twenty-year-old Aasa Singh, gifted with a magical voice, starts Bhairavi, reaching higher notes as the sun slowly rises above the lake nearby. He is oblivious to his audience. Later, as he puts his tanpura down, he says, "I feel blessed."